



March 22, 2004

Secretary William G. Ross Jr.
Secretary Department of Environment and Natural Resources
1601 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699

Dear Secretary Ross:

Thank you so much for the opportunity to comment on the North Carolina Mountains-to-Sea Trail Eastern Segment Plan. I am honored at the request and naturally, I do have some thoughts on the project. First, let me say that this plan, done correctly, is a grand vision of a legacy far beyond a greenway down the Neuse River. This project could be the catalyst for transforming Eastern North Carolina towns and cities into places with healthier life styles, higher quality of life and a greater sense of community. Such a project not only represents recreation opportunities but also economic development, transportation alternatives, and tourism dollars, and could be a model for the nation. It is apparent that this plan was written with the local user in mind. The series of meetings held along the planning corridor has served to generate interest exactly where it is needed, at the local level. But to be successful, such a plan must be implemented from 1) the bottom up, 2) from the inside out and 3) funded with matching funds.

Bottom Up

To be successful, implementation of this plan must have support from the communities that will be impacted. Better stated, this conceptual plan can be the basis for generating a master plan for each community that must originate within that community. Done correctly, I envision high levels of excitement around using this corridor and the plan as an opportunity to redesign their communities, tying the greenway corridor to the downtowns, parks, shopping, lodging, areas of interest, etc.

Such a trail corridor could then be part of revitalizing towns toward more a walkable and bikeable infrastructure, where citizens could access their entire community, as well as the Neuse corridor. With such a master plan, citizens, elected officials and staff would be totally energized and committed because it would be their plan. I predict you will hear stories of how this project has transformed towns in such a positive way that would have never been possible without the assistance of the State of North Carolina. You will hear stories of how people are moving to be closer to the greenway or moving into the town because of the unique recreational opportunities; how commerce and lodging become part of the economic culture as tourist come to visit quaint towns along the Neuse, biking their way up and down the corridor.

Inside Out

To be successful, this corridor has to be planned from the towns outward. This is where the people live and want the corridor first, as you will see once the community master plans are completed. Outlying connectors can be done later and I even see the possibility of using state or federal funding for the connectors between cities. This framework is similar to what is happening with Chatham County for the American Tobacco Trail. We got Durham and Wake counties excited about the idea, and they are already building their corridors. In order to complete the project, we need some state or federal dollars for the final connection through Chatham County, just as these planning corridor counties will need assistance to form the final links in the trail.

Financed by Matching Funding

One of the most synergistic things happening in government right now is matching funds. Elected officials are enthralled by matching funds because town dollars go farther, and citizens are more supportive of projects using matching funds because they see a reasonable way to realize the dreams they helped create. And you can tell the general assembly that you are building this project at 50 cents on the dollar! We have used this approach with our Open Space Fund for Wake County in partnership with municipalities, and you would not believe the level of enthusiasm for the program. We then go one step further by giving towns the resources to find their half of the match.

Funding

The best part of the implementation of this plan would be the funding. My suggestion is that in the first year, an allocation of one million dollars or more could help fund the design of a master plan for all the towns along the corridor on a 50% matching basis. The return on this relatively small investment would be significant.

I would caution you to be sure these master plans stay local. In other words, the master plan would be done by and belong to the town, and they should be able to make the scope as large or small as they want. Naturally you can have input and set parameters but, at the end of the day, by making the master plans a local creation, you are also forming advocacy groups who will then work in subsequent years to find the funding for the projects in their plans.

Funding should be made available with matching grants based on the best designs and the most energy and most potential for each community. The process should concentrate on the communities with the most interest and allow the others to follow once they see what is happening elsewhere. Then, over time, you connect the gaps in the corridor using other grant dollars.

In this way, towns become hubs of activity for recreation, tourism and economic development. Throughout this process, everything is happening from leadership within the communities, while being empowered by state government. What a concept! We are not talking about a trail that runs

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from the mountains to the sea. We are talking about transforming our towns into more viable, livable, desirable, healthy centers of the community. All these goals are within our grasp. With just a little bit of seed money and by releasing the creative spirit already within our communities, who are only waiting for this opportunity to become available, success is inevitable.

Thanks again for this opportunity to share my ideas. If you would like to meet in person for more details, please let me know. Also, if there is anyway I can assist in your efforts, please let me know.

Respectfully Submitted:

Sig Hutchinson

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